

6-5-1997

VerHelst, Jan Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

Lamont Dirkse

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/ses_holland



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Dirkse, Lamont, "VerHelst, Jan Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"" (1997). *Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"*. Paper 155.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/ses_holland/155

Published in: 1996 - 1998 - *Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"* (H88-0234) - *Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project*, June 5, 1997. Copyright © 1997 Hope College, Holland, MI.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Hope College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years" by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.

Oral History Interview with
Jan Ver Helst

Conducted June 5, 1997
by Lamont Dirkse

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with Jan Ver Helst
June 5, 1997
Interviewer: Lamont Dirkse

LD: Will you give me your name, and your maiden name as well, and your date of birth?

JVH: I'm Janice Vander Borgh Ver Helst and I was born [date removed], 1928.

LD: With the name of Vander Borgh and Ver Helst, it sounds as if it's pretty Dutch.

JVH: That's right.

LD: Could you tell me something about your parents, your mother and father, where they were born and how did they meet and so forth?

JVH: My mother was born in Iowa and came to college after completing high school there and teaching in a one room schoolhouse for two years in order to get money to get money to come to Holland and to Hope. My dad is from Long Island so they're from quite a distance apart. Dad had graduated from Hope when mom came here. He went to India for two years immediately following college as a teacher in a mission school, came back here to the States because of illness and began teaching in the Hope Prep School. And when my mother was here my dad was an instructor on the faculty. I don't know exactly how and where they met. I've been told it was at the home of Irwin Lubbers where my mother was assisting in some baby care, housework care to earn some funds as she was going to school. And dad and Dr. Lubbers had gone to India together, so they were friends.

LD: Do you remember visits with your grandparents at other places?

JVH: Just my mother's parents and my father's mother lived with us for many years until

her death, but my father's father had died when dad was only seven. My mother's parents lived in Holland for most of my life after being on a farm in Iowa.

LD: What was it like growing up in Holland, Michigan?

JVH: Oh! Holland was a much quieter town in those days. People walked a good deal more than they drove. We lived almost a mile from the campus and I often walked it when I was going to college, always walked it when I was going to school, high school, grade school. School buses were not known within the city limits too much. Traffic I think is one of the biggest things I notice. We had no fears about walking at night so I guess maybe the crime situation is more pronounced more now. Families were closer. People didn't move around as much. They stayed in Holland if they had been born and raised here a good deal more than they do now.

LD: What was it like being a PK?

JVH: A PK! A prof's kid. It didn't really affect me a whole lot except I remember in grade school my dad being in the education department of the college he had responsibility for overseeing student teaching. Every once in a while when we had a student teacher I would have my father sitting in the back of the classroom observing the teacher which was the source of a good deal of embarrassment at that time.

(Laughs) PKs - really we didn't get familiar with the term until we were in college and then there was a whole group of us. Probably six or seven who had fathers mostly on the Hope faculty.

LD: Did you have any relationship with PK kids before when you were growing up? Parties or anything?

JVH: The Hope faculty was very small then and our dads had been on the campus for many years and there were a lot of faculty get togethers, picnics mostly, in the summertime. And so the kids then were thrown together. And many of our parents were friends as well, so we did know one another by the time we got to college even though some of us had not gone to the same high school. We were all friends.

LD: I heard via the grape vine that you had a birthday party when you were one year old and you had some PK kids there?

JVH: Yes. I think almost exclusively. There were four, perhaps five kids there, but four of them were PKs. We were all girls, all one year old within that year so...

LD: Tell me a little bit about your family, Jan. You said you grew up in Holland and you went to Hope College. Did you meet someone special at Hope College?

JVH: I met my husband-to-be here. We sat next to one another in a speech class. Back in those days everybody was seated alphabetically. I imagine that's how you met your spouse also.

LD: That's right.

JVH: We were one chair apart actually in a speech class in the second semester of our freshman year. So yes I did.

LD: What about your children? What about your early years? Were you in this area? Did you stay living in Holland?

JVH: No. After graduation I taught school in Spring Lake and my husband taught in Muskegon and a year and a half later went into the Air Force. So we were Air Force people for about ten years. Jeff, my oldest, was born in Holland while his father was

stationed down in Texas. Jenni was born in New Jersey when we were living out there.

LD: When did you return to Holland?

JVH: Well, Bud was declared ill with Hodgkins disease after he'd been in the service for almost ten years and was retired from the Air Force. So we came back to Holland in about '61, I think it was. Lived a year in Grand Haven actually first and then in '62 moved to Holland and bought a house out in the Heights. My husband died in '65.

LD: In 1965. What was it like, Jan, to return to Holland after being away for ten years?

JVH: At that point a lot of our friends were not living in Holland. They had graduated from Hope and had moved elsewhere. We joined a church which was just a block down the street from where we were living and made many new friends in that church. Holland had grown considerably in that time. A lot of the things were new to me. But of course we had visited every year since we had left and so some of the things in the matter of growth we were aware of. The school system at that point was undergoing a terrible problem with some problems involving internal structure, I think, within the school system. So we were not a part of the city school system at that point out in the Heights. We did become that later. My kids were in the Holland Heights Schools which were fine. It was good to be back. My parents lived just a block or two away from us so that was helpful.

LD: You said that you attended Hope College. Let's go back a little. What was Hope like in 1946? Were there any real differences at that time than before?

JVH: Well, that was a noteworthy era! The college had shrunk considerably in size

because of the war. There were mostly girls - women students, excuse me, I'm not being politically correct. And when the war ended the veterans came back in great number. And that was our class which ultimately was the class of '50. We more than doubled the size of the college and all of us remember that fond day of registration when we stood out in the rain and made a mile long line to get into the right classes and really overwhelmed the college with our numbers. And then, of course, most of the students were older than we were and hadn't a great deal of interest in fraternities and the other things that were typical of college life. It was a challenge for all of us, I think.

LD: Did you live on the campus?

JVH: No, at that point in time people who lived in town almost exclusively lived at home. It was almost unheard of for someone who was a townie to live in the dorm.

LD: You mentioned that your class probably overwhelmed the college. Were they prepared for that? What did they do for housing and things like that?

JVH: They really took over very strange buildings for college. I remember they built a quonset hut and what they called the T-barracks for the veterans and their families because many of them were married. We appropriated what had been an old school, it's now been torn down for many years, and they put girls in that building on Graves Place. I remember one of the rooms had nine girls in one room. It was really a makeshift situation for that freshman year of ours.

LD: You had mentioned sororities and fraternities. Were you a member of a sorority?

JVH: Yes. I was a member of Delta Phi.

LD: Did quite a few of the women at that time join?

JVH: I would say more of the women perhaps than the men percentage-wise. All of my close friends happened to be in Delphi also. There were six or seven of us who were pretty inseparable during college and more of the women I would guess were in sororities than men were in fraternities.

LD: Was this your main social life as far as campus is concerned?

JVH: Yes, I would guess so. My husband-to-be was not in a fraternity, so Delphi was pretty much the center of the fun things that we did during the school year. But our friendships were always strong so we had other things that we did outside of college. But college life pretty much centered upon classrooms and exams and college and sorority activities, I would say.

LD: Then after you were married, you left Holland for about ten years did you say?

JVH: Just about.

LD: Where did you live during those ten years?

JVH: Well, a lot of that time we were apart. Bud went through a year of basic training and of living as a non-com; a private first and then an airman first class and so forth. He was not given his commission until he had been in almost a year. We were on a survey team down south during that first year and also during that time I was pregnant. So I came home where my son was born and he went down to Texas and received a direct commission at that point, in fact, the day Jeff was born. And finished up officers training there and he spent a few years down in Mississippi down in Biloxi down at Keesler Air Force Base and in Jackson, Mississippi. Then he was

sent overseas and I came home again and he was in the Azores for about nineteen months. When he came back from there we went to New Jersey where we were for four years and that was our last station.

LD: What were some of the biggest changes that you thought took place in Holland when you came back?

JVH: I think cultural differences were a big thing. This had been very much a Dutch town even when I was in college. During those years that we were gone, the non-caucasian element, that sounds awful, but the numbers began to change at that point, I think. We noticed many people who were of other backgrounds than caucasian. I mentioned the traffic situation, the school situation. I think that racial component, and I think it was a good way to make a diversification here in town. I'm not being critical of that. It added something to the community that had not been there before, and it kind of got us out of our little Dutch rut a little bit I think. But it was a very noticeable difference when we came back.

LD: We're talking about some of these changes. Diversification.

JVH: I think industry would be another change. There was a great deal of large industry beginning to form and come in with the GE plant and some of the industries now which are very large were getting their start.

LD: In other words, you more or less feel that these changes have been good for Holland.

JVH: For the most part, yes. Sometimes I'd like to go back to as we say, "the good old days," when you would not lock your doors. When you could easily find a parking place. When you didn't have to contend with major traffic jams, but I think we have

to put that behind us. That's not something that is going to change no matter where you live.

LD: Seeing we're celebrating our sesquicentennial anniversary this year, do you remember any celebrations in the city of Holland?

JVH: I remember being part of one. And for the life of us none of us can figure out exactly when that was (laughs). It took place at Riverview Park and it was a big affair. Some of us on the Hope faculty as kids were part of it. It was historical, I think a reenactment of the founding of Holland, and we played minor roles in it like a pageant, I believe you would call it. But I don't remember the date of that year.

LD: Were you involved at all in the hundredth anniversary?

JVH: That would have been '46? No, I really don't. That was the year we started college or graduated from high school. I have no recollection of anything being done there. I'm sure there was.

LD: I think it was possibly even celebrated during '47. The following summer they had the big parade.

JVH: In 1947?

LD: In 1947.

JVH: Yes, that's right. That would be the hundredth year, wouldn't it? I'm sorry. My date's wrong.

LD: You mentioned that when you came back to Holland you became a member of a church "a block away." Was that your home church when you lived in Holland before?

JVH: No. I had been born and raised in Third Reformed Church and we gave some thought to going back there but we decided because of our children's sake primarily it would be smarter and be better for them to be in a neighborhood church so that the kids in their Sunday School classes and so forth would be people they knew and went to school with. And it was more convenient of course.

LD: I think you sort of stressed already the Dutch...the relationship with the churches and so on. Did you have any relationship with the Christian Reformed Church?

JVH: Me personally? No, none.

LD: But do you feel the relationship between the "CRC" and the Reformed Church today is different than it was when you were in the process of growing up?

JVH: I think it's better today. I think there's less rivalry which is good. There should always be a certain amount of it, especially on the athletic field I think. (Laughs)

LD: Now, are you thinking of college life or are you thinking of high school?

JVH: No, I'm thinking of college.

LD: We talked about changing of the industry in the city of Holland and I think your comments were positive in regard to that as well? If you look at Holland today, how do you feel about it?

JVH: When you talk about industry, that's been a big plus for this city. We have a very low unemployment rate and I'm sure that's brought in a lot of people to the city. The industries here are really off and running. Holland also has the benefit from the fact that many of these industries are family owned affairs. And the people who own them are people who live here in Holland and they have succeeded remarkably. I

think almost without exception those people who have the businesses, who are the owners, have contributed in wonderfully generous ways to this community and we could cite all kinds of instances where there have been major donations given to better the city in many ways. I think it's been a big plus.

LD: We've been talking about business, industry and so on and we have not gone back to what have you done since you came back to Holland. When you came back to Holland your children were in elementary school and so on. Did you go back to join the work force? You indicated earlier that you were a teacher.

JVH: I had taught in Spring Lake for two years and then we went into the service and of course then when you had a child or were pregnant and were expecting a child you stopped teaching. That was expected. And with the moving around that we did in the service I never went back to work until after we came back to Holland in '62. In October of '62, a classmate who was an administrator in the West Ottawa system asked me if I would be interested in working as a elementary school librarian in the West Ottawa School District. They were just beginning to think about organizing their libraries and I had a minor in library science from Hope. So after almost a month of soul searching, because I really didn't know whether this was the time to go back to the work force again, but I did. And worked two and a half days a week to start with and then gradually increased until it was four days a week and worked there for the next twenty-six years.

LD: Twenty-six years!

JVH: In West Ottawa.

LD: Did you see real strides?

JVH: Oh yes. I saw strides. Especially since I've left (laughs) I think!

LD: Especially since you've left?

JVH: Well, they've all been very much automated with technology and that's not my field.

But the stress on libraries and all the computer systems and everything has really markedly changed in the last few years, all for the better I think. They were good years; we enjoyed all of it. I think being a teacher when you're raising children is a wonderful career because then your vacations coincide and you have very good health benefits. There are a lot of pluses to teaching, I think.

LD: Did you notice drastic changes in the school system after you returned from when you started teaching back in 1950?

JVH: Not at that point. Of course, they were two different towns. No, I really didn't. I think they have changed since then and the stress on the family situation now has made a big change in the school system. I think there are problems now that didn't exist even fifteen years ago. Kids have an awful lot of things to cope with nowadays and family life is drastically different from what it was and it's markedly affected the school system.

LD: It's affected the school system...it's affected life...?

JVH: In general.

LD: How do you think the role of women has changed, and I think you touched on that briefly, in the last fifty years?

JVH: Fifty?

LD: Just tossing that out seeing we're at the sesquicentennial year. I think most of the changes, don't you think, have taken place in the last fifty?

JVH: Yes, probably less than that even. As I guess I referred to, when you were pregnant you did not continue teaching. That was just a big no-no. And nowadays women teach until the day they give birth. But I think that's fine. Women have taken a place within the work place that they've never had before. I think perhaps that started with World War II when they had to step in and the Rosie the Riveters began their careers. But I think in all areas of the work place now we're seeing women using their gifts, and before that I don't think women were encouraged to be anything other than secretaries, nurses or teachers. Now there's almost nothing they cannot achieve. So I think it's a big improvement. I'm not so sure that the family life has always been better, but many people are able to work that out successfully.

LD: Have you been involved in child care experiences since you've retired?

JVH: Not majorly, no. Occasionally on an evening but...

LD: You had talked a little about diversification. Could you expand on that? What do you make of the increasing diversity? I think you talked about the Hispanics. Anything about other...?

JVH: Well, I think other than the Native Americans, the Hispanics have been the first group to come here. I remember working at the Heinz Pickle Factory one year, my first year at college, and that was when we began to notice the migrant workers that were coming in and that's been a strong influence. Many of those stayed and have become good contributing members of this community. Now in the last fifteen years

or so there have been many people from the east, from various places in the Orient who have come here. I was noticing at high school graduation the other night how many of the names sounded as if they might have been Cambodian or Vietnamese, something in that part of the world. And each one has come here with their own various cultures. They don't speak the same languages even though they may all be Oriental. Their languages and their customs are different and they've all brought that with them. I think the emphasis on diversity is wonderful but I think you can carry it too far to the point where we sometimes forget that unity is the goal even though we stress our diversities and our various cultures. We've got to keep that unification in mind. That's where I see the source of the problems.

LD: What do you see being done today to encourage interaction?

JVH: I think there have been some concerted efforts in the school systems and also in the town to get people to interact, but I don't see it happening. The festivals for each culture pretty much remain separate, I think. I don't see too much mixing in that area. I don't know the solution to that problem as long as we keep stressing the differences. We need to stress the fact that unless we can work together and live together successfully and erase those lines to the degree in which these situations will work, I don't think this culture or diversity is going to be a plus.

LD: Are we finding that locally industry and even city government hiring minority people?

JVH: Is that a plus, you mean?

LD: Yes, is it a plus? I mean, do you see it happening?

JVH: Oh yeah, I think so. Particularly in the Latino community we have more and more of

them getting involved in things going on in the city, but I'd like to see that number increase.

LD: Could you expand a little on your response in the area of festivals and so on? You indicated you didn't see a great deal of interaction in the festivals.

JVH: Well, I'm thinking of Cinco De Mayo perhaps which is a big festival for our Mexican friends and it's a wonderful occasion. I wonder how many people who are non-Latino attend that. It does get some coverage in the paper, which is great. And I know the schools have had multicultural days where they have stressed various cultures. I think that's great. I just would like to see everybody be a part of everybody else's festival, I think.

LD: You're feeling, though, that the diversified segment do participate in, say, the Dutch activities.

JVH: Oh yeah.

LD: For instance, I'm thinking of Tulip Time. The Children's Parade.

JVH: I don't think the kids have a whole lot of choice in that matter, however. (Laughs)

LD: Either they're in school or they participate.

JVH: Right!

LD: How do you feel about the emphasis of the Dutch heritage today in our community? Should we be emphasizing it less? We're making a big deal of the 150th anniversary right now.

JVH: Well, we can't re-write history. This town was founded by a Dutch contingent led by a Dutch man. We can't change that. The name of the town is Holland. What we

choose to do with it in the future as far as how we live our lives in this community is something else again, but we can't change the past. And I don't think we should drop that emphasis on our founding. I don't think any city does that. When we celebrate the founding of the community we celebrate what happened. And that's not saying you're pro-Dutch and anti other kinds of nationalities. You're just discussing history.

LD: Holland's growing by leaps and bounds. Do you have any personal reactions?

JVH: I feel very sorry for the school systems, particularly the ones outside the city of Holland which are experiencing the major brunt of the growth. I think Holland is not finding that a problem as much. The schools are growing to the point where they could almost build a new one every year, in some of these school districts, and I think that's a major problem. I think growth of buildings and homes has sometimes gotten a little out of hand. I think we need to be very careful that we do some zoning and some pre-planning of how we want to grow. I hope that all the communities are doing that. I know we've had some problems in that area in the past. Maybe we're becoming more aware of that now.

LD: You mentioned it's happening on the outskirts. I guess you can't call them suburbs of Holland. They're almost bigger than Holland (Laughs). Our boundaries are more or less...

JVH: We're land or water locked.

LD: We're locked at the present time. But, as you said, we are growing - specifically north between here and...of course, that's old drive in territory for you from Holland to Grand Haven and back and forth. I'm sure you see drastic changes.

JVH: That highway didn't exist when we were in college. We took what is now called the "old Grand Haven road."

LD: As you look back at your alma mater now, Hope College, and you see the changes that are taking place there, what are some of your personal reactions or feelings?

JVH: I think the college has grown considerably. They've certainly grown space-wise, purchasing more and more of the buildings around and I think that is a good thing for the college. And I hope that town-gown relationship will always be a good one. When I look at other communities where the college is either on the fringe of the town or there has not been an effort to maintain good relationships with the town, I'm just really proud of what Holland and Hope have done in the main to foster this kind of a good working relationship. There's a little resentment now and then but I think those things always pass with time. And the fact that the college has expanded now closer to the downtown areas, there are good things for both the town and the college.

LD: What are some of the things that you are involved in right now in the city of Holland that occupy your time and keep you going?

JVH: Well, you know I'm working in the college HASP office, the Hope Academy of Senior Professionals, part time. Community involvement - I'm a member of the League of Women Voters in Holland and of the American Association of University Women. Involved with the affairs at church. I think that's about it.

LD: You mention you are a member of the HASP organization. What has this organization done specifically or how has it enriched your life?

JVH: Oh, it's a great organization! And that's another one that's experiencing a

tremendous amount of growth. I joined it in 1990, I think. And it has more than doubled in size since then. We have now over 300 members. The Hope Academy of Senior Professionals is a group of retired people, primarily with professional or business backgrounds, both genders, male and female. It has provided a great deal of intellectual stimulation for me and for all of its members in the area of classes, trips, excursions, and events that we attend. It's given us relationships with people who have not been from the Holland area. There are many of them who are from out of the town and moved to Holland as they retired and it's been a very enriching organization.

LD: If you look at the things that have changed in your life span here in Holland and you begin thinking of the future, what are some specific concerns that you think city government, the Chamber of Commerce, the churches and so on should be doing?

JVH: I guess as you get older in some ways you get more fearful. I worry about the crime element in town. I worry about the fact that in some ways the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and what that is going to ultimately mean for our nation as a whole, really. I hope that communities and churches in the community will become involved in major ways in seeing that the young people of this town are not alienated from the main stream which I see happening in greater numbers. And I see that as a major problem in the future - this alienation of the "outs" looking in. It's not healthy for a community and I've seen some wonderful efforts taking place to prevent that and I hope that those will continue.

LD: Such as?

JVH: I think the churches have gotten involved in the schools. The retirees have gotten involved in the schools. And I think that volunteer programs in the schools has got to increase. And I think the people in town who are...as I said, many of them wonderful contributors, the people who have been leaders in industry. I think many more people need to contribute time and dollars preventing some unsound...I hate to be picking on the young people but that's where our future lies and that's where my concerns lie, I guess. Making sure that these people become a part of the community. And I don't know the methods always to do that!

LD: You think the churches are doing more in that area?

JVH: They've begun to, I think. Don't you? There is never too much of that.

LD: If we just wanted to conclude right now, what would be a good summary statement you might want to make about Holland?

JVH: Holland is a terrific city. We came back here after being gone for about fifteen years including the years we were teaching at the time. I'm happy to have raised my children here. I've had a supportive community. And I don't think that changes. Basically it's been a fine town. A strong church community. A strong economic community. A good school system. I think Holland has much to celebrate and to proud of for the 150 years - the vision of the city founder was incredible and I think we owe a great deal to Dr. Van Raalte for the way he saw the future, both for education and community. And it's basically a town to be proud of!